ALSO BY ROBERT KANIGEL

Eyes on the Street
On an Irish Island
Faux Real
High Season
Vintage Reading
The One Best Way
The Man Who Knew Infinity
Apprentice to Genius

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

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Contents

PART ONE

Edifice

1

YOUNG ALBERT AND MR. PARRY

When she asked where they were going and why, Milman Parry's daughter, Marian, would recall,

> my father explained that Jugoslavia was an uncivilized country at the edge of the world, on the border of the Slavic wilderness which stretched from the Adriatic to Alaska. Since hardly anyone could read or write Jugoslavians still had retained their oral poetry and their ancient native national civilization. There were still heroes, and heroic acts and the ancient heroes were celebrated in ballads by guslars, or bards, who knew by heart so much poetry that if it were written down it would fill libraries. But the whole thing depended, my father explained, on the fact that they couldn't write it down; as soon as literacy becomes common in a country, everyone gets lazy; they don't bother to learn things by heart anymore and poetry is no longer a part of their daily life.

ln 1934 and 1935, Parry spent fifteen months in Yugoslavia, driving his black Ford sedan from town to town with his young assistant, Albert Lord. They stopped at village coffeehouses, spread word they were looking for local singers, recorded the songs they sang while strumming their rude, raspy one-stringed gusles. For a few days, or a week or two, Parry would stay, then head off for the next town, for Gacko or Kolašin, Bihać or Novi Pazar. In that hardscrabble, mostly mountainous backcountry, of roads rutted and electricity scarce, of dialects, religions, ancient wars, and

tribal resentments all butting up against one another, they struggled with equipment and supplies and bedbug-infested village inns. They powered their recording instrument with a battery charged by the engine of the Ford, shipped over from the States. Along with their native translator, Nikola, they'd periodically return to Dubrovnik, in a Croatian corner of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, where Parry's wife, daughter, and son awaited them. Then, the Parry house, halfway up the hill above the city, with its fine views of the harbor and the sea, became headquarters of almost military stamp, as transcribers set to work, typewriters clattering, taking down the words of the old songs.

In the end, Parry would gather half a ton of twelve-inch aluminum discs—phonograph records, the size of old vinyl LPs but in white metal—filled with a young nation's, and an old world's, cultural tradition. But Parry was interested in them not primarily for what they said of Bosnia, Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and elsewhere in the Balkans, but for what they might reveal, by analogy, of the older world of ancient Greece that had produced Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Finally, in a town nineteen hundred feet up into the mountains of northern Montenegro, an old man named Avdo Međedović, singer of tales of weddings and war that took days and days to tell, led Parry to conclude that in him they had found their own living Homer.

In September 1935, the Parrys and young Albert Lord returned to America.

On November 16, Parry, back at Harvard, where he was assistant professor of Greek and Lord was a recent graduate, wrote his sister that his wife was just then in Los Angeles. He gave her mailing address, which was that of his financially distraught mother-in-law.

On November 17, Parry was to give a talk on Yugoslav folk songs at Harvard.

On the eighteenth, he met with a student and reported on his progress.

A day or two later, he left for the West Coast.

On December 3, in a Los Angeles hotel room with his wife, a bullet fired from a handgun, said to have become entangled in his luggage as Parry rummaged through it, struck him in the chest and nicked his heart. He died later that day. He was thirty-three.

When hotel employees responded to Mrs. Parry's call, they assumed she had killed her husband; she was the only other person in their suite. The police, however, concluded otherwise, that it was an accident. No autopsy was performed. No charges were brought. Some would suspect that Parry had committed suicide. Later, among Parry's own children, that their mother had killed him was regarded as a real possibility: Maybe in one of her fits of fierce, irrational rage. Or maybe as cool-headed revenge for real or imagined infidelities, or other hurts he'd inflicted on her over the years. Mrs. Parry and her daughter, twisted by a lifetime's mutual antagonism, were both named Marian. Marian the younger was all but certain her mother had killed her father and held to this view all her life.

On December 5, 1935, Parry's body was cremated in Los Angeles. Two weeks later, back at Harvard, a memorial service was held in Appleton Chapel. In the eulogy it was said that Parry had returned from Yugoslavia "with copious material which no future investigators in his field can afford to neglect. His work will endure long after him."

In early 1936, Mrs. Parry donated most of her husband's books, recordings, and papers to Harvard and, with remarkable efficiency, decamped from Cambridge with her children, moved across the continent to Berkeley, California, returned to school at the university, and in little more than a year had earned the BA degree that pregnancy, marriage to Milman, and life with him in France, Cambridge, and Yugoslavia had interrupted.

Meanwhile, Parry's young assistant, Albert Lord, was left with the Yugoslav materials. After working with the man he would call his "master and friend" for fifteen months, he was now almost alone responsible for making something of them. Parry himself had had no chance to do so. Back in Yugoslavia, the winter before coming home, he'd dictated a few pages of notes and ideas; Lord

typed them up. And he had a title for the book he hoped to write, *The Singer of Tales*. Now it was all in the hands of Lord, who, at age twenty-three, was scarcely equipped to tackle the job.

Approaching graduation from Harvard in June 1934, Lord "had not the slightest idea of what to do with himself," reports David Bynum, a student and admiring younger colleague of Lord's from a later period. Yugoslavia had come at an opportune time—immediately after graduation, in the middle of the Depression, a time of few other job prospects. Lord served Parry as typist, gofer, and "recording engineer," freeing Parry for more substantive and intellectually challenging work. He had "no opportunity whatever, as well as no personal inclination, to inquire or know anything meaningful concerning what Parry was about or why in Yugoslavia." The shiny white aluminum discs were, in their thousands, logistical monster and intellectual mystery.

What transformed this untenable situation was this: However much or little his time in Yugoslavia might make him responsible in the eyes of the world for making something of Parry's work, Lord seemed to feel it did. And he felt it all the more with the passage of time, as a deep, pressing, personal need, one impossible to shirk. He had worked beside Parry for fifteen months; he would help advance and enrich Parry's ideas for more than fifty years. "In spite of moments when it seemed otherwise," Lord would write, "my life has been devoted to Parry's collection and to the work which he had only begun to do."

*

Milman Parry was arguably the most important American classical scholar of the twentieth century, by one reckoning "the Darwin of Homeric Studies." At age twenty-six, this young man from California stepped into the world of Continental philologists and overturned some of their most deeply cherished notions of ancient literature. Homer, Parry showed, was no "writer" at all. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were not "written," but had been composed orally, drawing on traditional ways that went back centuries.

Generations of high school and college students can recall descriptive flourishes of Odysseus, as "much-enduring," or "the man of many schemes"; or of the goddess Athena as "bright-eyed"; or of "swift-footed Achilles." Parry showed that these "ornamental epithets" were not odd little explosions of creativity. Nor, in their repetition, were they failures of the imagination. Nor were they random. They were the oral poet's way to fill out lines of verse and thus keep the great river of words flowing. They were the product of long tradition, and many voices. Parry wrote of the fifth-century BCE Greek sculptor Phidias that his work was not his alone but shot through with "the spirit of a whole race"; much the same, he said, applied to the Homeric epics.

Homer, of course, was no trifling asterisk of classical studies but stood at the very roots of Western civilization, his epic poems filled with stories of the warrior Achilles and the goddess Athena and the other gods and heroes enshrined on every ancient Greek potsherd, represented in paintings, sculpture, and literature for three thousand years, inspiring Shelley and Keats, Shakespeare and James Joyce. After Parry, just how Homer had come into the world and become embedded in the memory of humankind came to be seen in a new way.

Milman
Parry

As Walter Ong summed up the case in his groundbreaking 1982 book, *Orality and Literacy,*

> The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have been commonly regarded from antiquity to the present as the most exemplary, the truest and the most inspired secular poems in the western heritage. To account for their received excellence, each age has been inclined to interpret them as doing better what it conceived its [own] poets to be doing or aiming at.

That is, they tended to be seen like the poems of one's own age, whatever it was, only better.

But no, said Parry, Homer was different, and not just from the literature of our own time, or from Victorian literature, or from that of the Middle Ages, but even from almost all other ancient Greek literature. A rough, ill-formed thought might place the *Odyssey* and, say, Aeschylus's three-part tragedy, the *Oresteia,* under the same broad heading—ancient "classics," revered literary

products of Greece, stalwarts of the Western literary tradition. But Parry showed they were different animals altogether, because Aeschylus *wrote,* as you and I write, while the *Odyssey* was something else entirely, percolating up from oral performance over the centuries, shaped by its own, maddeningly "unliterary" rules: The literary critic sees repetition, stereotype, and cliché as unwelcome or worse. But for on-the-fly oral composition they were virtually essential, *characteristic* of it, understood and expected by audience and performer alike. For Parry they were the clue to how the epic poems had been made.

In time, Parry's ideas came to constitute their own orthodoxy, with scholars questioning them as they would anything else, placing them under relentless scrutiny. And yet in all the years since—it is now nearly a century since Parry first asserted them—they have become one of the cornerstones on which Homeric studies stand. And extended into new realms, they have altered understanding of other early cultures as well—not just in the West but in Asia, Africa, and around the world; and not just in past centuries but our own. Parry's ideas have forced us to rethink the role of books and print generally. The Yugoslav singers, like those of ancient Greece, could not read or write. Milman Parry helped us to imagine, understand, and respect another species of human creativity.

"The effects of oral states of consciousness," Walter Ong has written, "are bizarre to the literate mind."

*

I come to Milman Parry from outside the world of classical studies. While for a dozen years in the early 2000s I held a faculty position at a university, MIT, most of my working life has been spent outside academia altogether, as an independent writer. In the early years, I wrote articles, essays, and reviews for magazines and newspapers. Then, beginning in the 1980s, books—about mentor relationships among elite scientists, about tourism in Nice, about an Indian mathematical genius. A servant to my enthusiasms, I never much restricted myself by subject. In 2007,

the object of my fascination became a tiny island community off the far west coast of Ireland, known as the Great Blasket, inhabited by a few hundred Irish-speaking fishermen, visited by scholars, writers, and linguists from all over Europe.

One of these scholars was an Englishman, George Thomson, who first arrived on the island in 1923 and took a lively interest in it for the rest of his life. Professionally, he was a classicist, a student of Greek lyric poetry, of Aeschylus, of Homer. For most of his life he was professor of Greek at the University of Birmingham. Through his books, correspondence, and personal story I found him a warming and inspiring figure. Such were his sensibilities, and such were mine, that I could not confine my interest to his place in the Irish story; I became intrigued by whatever intrigued him. Soon I was reading his translation of the *Oresteia,* from which I came away thrilled by the astonishing transformation wrought by Athena in the third play, where vengeance metamorphoses into something like justice. From Aeschylus, then, it was on to the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* through the lustrous and lucid Robert Fagles translations; these were my first forays into Homer since junior high school. Ultimately, I was caught up in Thomson's ideas about the Homeric Question, the fertile, endlessly fascinating, centuries-old debate about who Homer was, when and where he'd lived, and what it meant, if anything, to attribute to him the authorship of the ancient epics. And the Homeric Question, in turn, led me to Milman Parry.

As one over-neat formulation of his achievement put it, Parry "never solved the Homeric Question; he demonstrated that it was irrelevant." Jettisoning contradictions in Homer that to his mind weren't contradictions at all, he opened the world of classical scholarship to new notions of literary creation. And he did so in a peculiarly single-minded way that made for its own, charmingly geekish story: In the decade after first asserting his ideas, Parry enriched his original insights with such deep analysis of the hexametric line in which the epics were written, such abundance of detail, such obsessive regard for closing off alternative explanations, that, in a scholarly world riven by fractious debate,

few could doubt their truth, leaving others to pick at the periphery of his big idea. Classicists today refer to "before Parry" and "after Parry." They speak not of Parry's "theory," or "argument," but of his "discovery." This isn't *quite* true, but it is true enough, many of his demonstrations and proofs seemingly airtight.

Over the years much attention has been paid to Parry's ideas; less to the progression of his thought set against the times and places in which he lived, or the sensibilities and personal history of Parry himself. This book is a story of intellectual discovery rooted in a field, classical studies, often relegated in the popular imagination to the outlands of the irrelevant and the obscure. But success in any field, however recondite, is always a story of humans at work, in all their hope and glory, and in the face of all their foibles and excesses. Homer and ancient Greece stand near the center of this book; but nearer still is Mr. Parry himself. Our story plays out in the times and places in which he lived—across just a dozen years in the 1920s and 1930s, in California, in Paris, at Harvard, and on the Balkan peninsula, where Parry went to test his ideas on a living tradition.

Hearing Homer's Song is the story of Mrs. Parry, too—Marian Thanhouser Parry, who was with him at the University of California at Berkeley at the time of his earliest insights, and with him, too, at the moment of his death. Their marriage was conventional and distant, at best, but inexorably looms large in this book.

To anyone moved to reflect on the nature of human genius or, less grandly, of intellectual work at its highest and best, it is hard not to wonder about the turns of Parry's personal story. From where do great ideas emerge? What are the conditions of domestic life, of home and family, marriage and children, that nourish or discourage them? Parry could seem to have come out of nowhere. The son of an only intermittently successful druggist, he was the first in his family to attend college. At Cal, he studied Greek. His most important papers, in their precision, detail, and recourse to statistical evidence, bear the stigmata of science. But he was a romantic, too, alive with wanderlust. In Yugoslavia, it would be

said of him, he loved "to visit the local pashas and exchange amenities, to ply his *gouslars* with wine and listen to their lies." He was enchanted by T. E. Lawrence and his Arabian exploits. He entertained his children with whimsical stories of Mickey Mouse and Winnie-the-Pooh. His daughter told of being brought up to believe "that Great Literature, Good Taste, and Harvard were the most important things in life"—only to immediately correct herself: "No, the *first* thing was to always try to be a hero."

Parry's stature did not arise all at once but gradually grew after his death. Before 1935, he'd begun to get attention from classicists and linguists, enough to earn him a faculty appointment at Harvard. But in fact it was Albert Lord, saddled with all those aluminum discs in 1935, who would further establish Parry's reputation and fix him in the mind of the scholarly world. Save for their brief time in Yugoslavia, the two never really worked together; they could scarcely be said to have truly "collaborated." Yet Lord would take on the mantle of Parry's legacy, first in his own doctoral thesis and then in a highly successful 1960 book. And along the way, quite independently, he'd take Parry's ideas in directions his master might scarcely have imagined, vastly enlarging their range of application. By the time Lord died in 1991 the two of them would be linked almost as one, "Parry and Lord" as enshrined in its respective corner of the intellectual world as Watson and Crick, discoverers of the structure of DNA, were in theirs.

Parry was dead but, thanks in large part to Lord—one could hardly contend otherwise—he lived on.

2

SINGER OF TALES

In February 1937, after receiving his MA in comparative literature from Harvard, Lord wrote a University of Wisconsin scholar with whom he'd spoken before, Miles Hanley, about making copies of the aluminum records he and Parry had brought back from Yugoslavia (at one point reputedly stored in the boiler room of the university's Widener Library); unwilling to take any chances with the originals, Lord wanted copies to take back to Yugoslavia for transcription.

The following month, he wrote the Harvard faculty committee overseeing the Parry Collection, asking that someone be hired to help him with the cataloguing of it. As it was, the collection was "painful and unmanageable" to work with. On his own, he was progressing "so slowly that it seems rather hopeless." He needed a typist, too. And the apparatus for transcribing discs he planned to take to Yugoslavia later that year was on the blink. Altogether, managing the collection was proving "an impossible task for a single person without aid in the more routine matters."

This was early 1937. In March, Lord was named to Harvard's Society of Fellows, a recently established honorary society for young scholars of promise who, without pressure to take classes or pursue a degree, enjoyed freedom, expenses paid, to roam the intellectual territory of their choice. Lord began his three-year appointment by boarding the *Vulcania* for Europe, bound for Dubrovnik and thence elsewhere in the Balkans to collect more songs like those Parry had gathered two years before. The trip took him to new locations in Albania but also to some of the same spots to which Parry had introduced him. Dubrovnik, he wrote his

parents, was "the same charming place it always was, and the family [with which he had stayed earlier] just as before. Not one of them seems a day older or a mite different....Of course...one misses the big house down below and the Parrys."

The whole trip would resurrect in him the spirit and memory of Parry.

In August, he returned to Stolac, where he and Parry had been in 1934 and 1935, "to hear the gusle again, ride horseback, and get out of the rut of Dubrovnik routine." There, the day

> was spent in looking up old friends, singers, and sitting about in the cafes, eating cantaloupe and drinking coffee. That night we went to hear one of our guslars sing. It was a glorious experience again, lying at ease on heavy woolen blankets—like those I brought back to America [from his first trip]—hearing our Moslem friend, an old man of seventy, sitting beside his fireplace, on the floor, of course, cross-legged, singing the old songs we know so well.

In early September, now finally in northern Albania, Lord took time to record the events of the past few days. In one village, they'd been entertained "by the chief elder. They killed a sheep in our honor. First, according to mountain custom, we sat on the floor and had a kind of brandy accompanied by raw onions, fresh cheese and roast liver. This took, with conversation, nearly an hour. They never leave a glass empty, or even partly filled...."

By November, with a hundred new dictated texts in hand from Albania, Lord was back in New York. Around this time, he wrote for his Harvard class's Triennial Report that he was working on his PhD, and "probably shall be thus engaged for another two years." He was living on campus, in Kirkland House, just upstairs from Parry's old suite.

Next academic year, he taught a course in Serbian language and literature. It was his first teaching job, he wrote George Herzog, a Hungarian-born Columbia University ethnomusicologist, in November 1938, and "it has proven something of a burden."

Then, too, "the business of editing and publishing selected texts from the collection now looms before me."

Lord was in his late twenties, apparently making little progress on his doctoral thesis, trying to manage the Parry Collection's records, songs, and paperwork, and he was tired. Maybe beyond tired. "Despair takes hold of me every now and then, despair that I shall never feel sure enough of myself to publish."

In April 1940, he wrote Herzog, apologizing for not having written. It had been a

> wretched and disappointing winter...Early in December I finally succumbed to worry and overwork, and my nerves cracked. After a brief stay in the hospital and short rest at home, I was sent away for a two months vacation. The doctors would not allow me to attend the MLA meetings in late December, nor give my Lowell lectures in February.

Years later, writing to Parry's widow, he'd call it what it was, "a nervous breakdown." No euphemisms, no shame, just the bare fact of it.

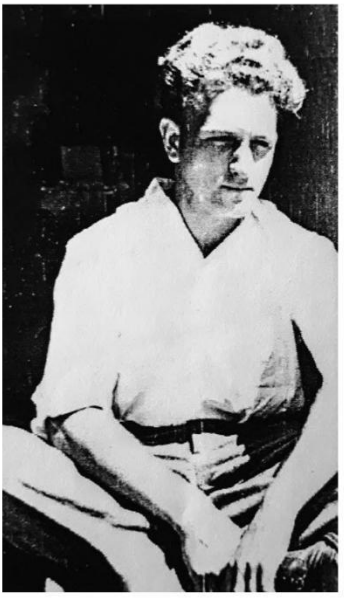
Two months later he wrote Herzog again, this time from his family's farm in New London, New Hampshire, a hundred miles from Boston. He was there, he explained, "for a combination of work and rest during the summer months. These were doctor's orders, because I was ill again early this month—nervous exhaustion again." His doctor told him to give up his Harvard research "for the coming year at least." His Society of Fellows appointment would be up the first of September. He needed a change of scene. Maybe he could teach for a while—perhaps classics, or Russian, or Serbo-Croatian: Did Herzog know of a position that would get him out of Harvard, out of Cambridge, and away from pressures and responsibilities for, say, a year?

But it wasn't teaching that got him away. And it wouldn't be for just a year. It was eight years before Lord was back at Harvard.

*

On January 22, 1941—almost a year before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that propelled America into the war—Lord showed up at the Boston naval shipyard in Charlestown for a physical examination by a navy doctor. He was five foot six and a half, 135 pounds, no venereal disease, appendix removed, normal hearing, close to normal eyesight, no evidence of mental or nervous abnormality. He was fine. The doctor judged him capable of performing duties requiring—here he had to choose an adjective —"arduous" physical exertion. Five days later, Lord started on his new job.

From now until long after the end of the war, Lord turned away from the body of work left undone by Milman Parry's death. Occasionally he would deal with matters related to the Parry Collection, such as helping composer Béla Bartók with a volume on Yugoslav folk music. He would translate part of a novel by the Serbian novelist Rastko Petrović, *The Sixth Day,* into English. And, probably in short spurts as his health and navy yard duties permitted, he'd confront his doctoral thesis. But normally, his daily work life left scant time or energy for much else. Rising at 6:30, he'd commute, probably by streetcar and subway, from his parents' house on Franklin Street in Allston, the close-in Boston suburb where he'd grown up, to the sprawling shipyard. There, in that vast complex of piers, cranes, and dry docks, destroyers and submarines were being built—and, with the onset of hostilities, battle-damaged warships repaired. His first job was that of "under clerk-typist" with the Supply Department, at $1,260 per year. Even then that wasn't much, less than a third of what Parry had made at Harvard. Someone would later suggest that Lord's hiatus reminded him of *Sullivan's Travels,* a popular Depression-era film about a well-off young man's quest to shed privilege and sample the "real" life of ordinary working people. But Lord's shipyard years probably served ends more therapeutic and practical than socially relevant.



Young Albert Lord, Bijelo Polje, summer of 1935.

With his strong efficiency ratings, Lord earned more as the war dragged on. He was regularly promoted, moving up several grades to "senior property and supply clerk." But he did suffer one telling setback: In 1944, a navy officer assigned to review Lord's ratings by his more immediate supervisors—on, for example, his ability to organize his work—down-rated them across the board; the "outstandings" his civilian supervisor gave him three days earlier became mere "adequates." The officer wrote: "No supervision exercised. Ability only for routine work. Lacks initiative." Subsequently, Lord's ratings, both initial and on review, bounced back up. Yet perhaps the officer was onto something: At least during this period, Lord was not conspicuously ambitious. He was earnest, responsible, careful—even over-careful. Later, certain scholarly rivals made fun of his tendency to balance every idea against its opposite: "But then, on the other hand..." This was no serious lack; under the right circumstances it was desirable. But at the navy yard, Lord seemed determined to avoid stress, stay just where he was. A personal history he'd filled out when he started

there cited his degrees from Harvard, his language skills in French, German, and Serbo-Croatian. But in the end nothing took him away from his typewriter for long. He knew just what he needed: "For eight years," he'd write later, "I had a vacation from academic life."

*

Finally, as Lord wrote, he felt "ready to return," resigning from his government job in July 1948, almost three years after the end of the war; he took with him, as memento of his shipyard days, a veritable doorstop of solid steel, part of an anchor chain. He completed his PhD the following year. In supporting Lord's application for a Guggenheim Fellowship back in February, Parry's Harvard colleague John Finley noted Lord's 1940 breakdown but reckoned him now "fully recovered." With Lord at the helm, Finley wrote, the Milman Parry Collection would be in good hands, thanks to Lord's "exceptional capacity for the work, a capacity mingledly deriving from his devoted loyalty to Parry's memory, his energetic and systematic mind, and his immersion in the material."

Lord's doctoral thesis was called "The Singer of Tales"—the title Parry had chosen for the book he planned to make from his Yugoslavia research. It told in rich, nuanced detail what Parry had done, what he and Lord had learned, about the lives of the singers, how they grew into their art, and how theirs amounted to a variant breed of literary creativity. His thesis defense was one not in name only but, it would be said, "in the real sense of a new and controversial thesis" that needed defending; several jury members left the room with minds quite altered. Ten years later his thesis came out as a book, much changed, but under the same title. Both bore the stamp of Parry on every page, as homage, reverie, and reminder of all Parry had thought and done more than a quarter century before.

Early in the book, Lord reviewed the confusions, inconsistencies, and scholarly battles bearing on the composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—the Homeric Question again—that had

raged for centuries. Finally, as if in a fit of scholarly wonder, he declared:

> It is a strange phenomenon in intellectual history as well as in scholarship that the great minds [whose ideas he'd just reviewed], minds which could formulate the most ingenious speculation, failed to realize that there might be some other way of composing a poem than that known to their own experience. They knew and spoke often of folk ballad and epic, they were aware of variants in these genres, yet they could see only two ways in which those variants could come into being: by lapse of memory or by willful change.

They could not, in short, conceive of an oral poetry—that is, one not merely spoken or sung in performance, but *composed* orally, on the fly, in the heat of the moment, driven by the stern exigencies of an expectant audience. It was a poetry, Parry had all but proved, that could produce an *Iliad* or *Odyssey:* "I believe that the greatest moment in recent Homeric scholarship was expressed by Milman Parry when he...spoke of his growing realization that what he had been calling traditional was in fact oral."

No one, least of all Parry, suggested that the songs of illiterate Yugoslav peasants had roots in ancient Greece. Indeed, it wasn't their particular stories and legends that seized Parry's imagination, but *how* they'd been created—orally, with no fixed text, each rendering of them a little different and a little new. The work of his Yugoslav singers, then, stood in compelling *analogy* to that of Homer.

But Greece and Yugoslavia were not home to the world's only traditional societies. Parry realized that oral composition of the Homeric epics hinted at the oral composition of other traditional works. In one of the last things he wrote—the fragmentary pages he'd call "Ćor Huso," or Blind Huso, referring to a South Slavic singer of legendary repute—he would venture into realms neither Homeric nor Yugoslav. He'd cite Marcel Jousse, the French Jesuit

thinker raised in rural France, away from books, in a world almost purely oral. He'd refer to an African tribe whose songs never changed much, "since the penalty of the change of any syllable was death." He'd tell of the Lomaxes, a family of Smithsonian folklorists, who advised him of "variations in the same song by the same singer" among Negroes in the American South.

Now, in *The Singer of Tales,* and then over the whole course of his Harvard career, Lord reached far beyond Parry. Within his doctoral thesis, then in his book of the same name, a new creative landscape opened up, one unlike any inhabited by a John Updike or a Margaret Atwood, the kinds of writers we mostly *mean* by writers. Here was a quite distinct force for the making of literary texts, one born in song and speech and only much later, if at all, reduced to print. It was this alternative creativity that Lord celebrated in *The Singer of Tales:*

> What is called oral tradition is as intricate and meaningful an art form as its derivative "literary tradition." In the extended sense of the word, oral tradition is as "literary" as literary tradition. It is not simply a less polished, more haphazard, or cruder second cousin twice removed, to literature. By the time the written techniques come onto the stage, the art forms have been long set and are already highly developed and ancient.

That appeared on page 141 of his book in a chapter entitled "Homer." The next chapter was devoted to the *Odyssey,* the chapter after that to the *Iliad*. All this lay comfortably within the fields of thought Parry had first planted. But now, in Lord's final chapter, came auguries of the intellectual revolution to come. It was entitled "Some Notes on Medieval Epic," and ventured beyond Homer and Yugoslavia. In the years since Milman Parry's death, Lord began, Harvard's Francis P. Magoun had applied the new "oral theory" to Old English. Others had applied it to Middle English romances; and to *chansons de gestes,* French songs from the late Middle Ages. In this chapter he would write of medieval epics

like *Beowulf*. The singers he had met in Stolac, Gacko, and dozens of other Yugoslavian towns had created exemplars of artistry much as Homer, and his tradition, had created the *Iliad*. Here, then, through the oral rather than the written, lay a strategy for discovering other such examples of narrative imagination in Africa, the Holy Land, Asia, everywhere. And these, long before the development of alphabets or other writing systems, were as important as any literary culture that came later, and as worthy of study.

Some readers surely balked at the idea. Scholars and writers are apt to dismiss words not immortalized on the page, issuing merely from the lips. People lie, repeat themselves, contradict what they've just said, phumph and jabber endlessly. Singers and storytellers, bombastic preachers, drunken barroom rhetoricians, fast-talking salesmen, Don Juans purveying sugarcoated come-ons —all were past masters of the shady arts of speech. We may listen, but we don't entirely trust; many of us want to see it in black and white, laid out on the page in front of us. Without that reassuring superstructure of print, speech and song can seem deficient.

Some such underlying habit of mind was what Lord helped overturn, his book inspiring a host of thinkers to offer convincingly new interpretations of the terrain between speech and print. In his 1963 book, *Preface to Plato,* Eric Havelock pictured oral poetry in early Greece as the means by which society held and transmitted its collective wisdom; small wonder, then, that Plato famously attacked written poetry, as it risked undermining the social structure of Athens. Then, in 1982, in *Orality and Literacy,* Walter Ong elevated the oral world to a new level of scholarly seriousness. Both thinkers expressed their indebtedness to Parry and Lord.

In 1986, John Miles Foley, a former student of Lord's, founded *Oral Tradition,* a journal expressly devoted to every aspect, in every age, of the oral cast of mind celebrated by Parry and Lord. In 2007, a whole issue of the journal was devoted to Bob Dylan. Richard F. Thomas, who later went on to explore Dylan's debt to the classics in *Why Bob Dylan Matters,* noted Dylan's antipathy to being locked

into the studio version of his songs, preferring rather to alter them, often radically, in performance; so there was never any true final version of "It Ain't Me, Babe" or "Tangled Up in Blue." This was something like how Parry and Lord imagined the Homeric epics taking shape, forever altered in performance, inevitably becoming something else, different, and new.

In the same issue, the essayist, photographer, and Allen Ginsberg scholar Gordon Ball offered his argument for why Bob Dylan merited the Nobel Prize in literature. In *literature*? But Dylan was musician as well as poet, his genius taking flight not through language alone but voice, music, performance. Didn't matter, wrote Ball. Music and poetry were forever and indissolubly linked; "poetry depends on oral performance," could never be wholly severed from it. Take Ginsberg's classic "Howl," the long poem that launched the Beat Generation of the 1950s. In such a poem "what's on the page may only be an approximation, sometimes a dim one, of what's in the air, in the poet's—the singer's—voice." Indeed, on first reading, "Howl" had left him cold; it took hearing it, on the wings of a human voice, Ginsberg's own, to win him over. All this bolstered his argument for Dylan's Nobel. "Let me be clear," he took care to add, "I don't mean to say that the Greek 'singer of tales' " of Lord's classic book, "and 'the vagabond who's rapping at your door,' " from a classic Dylan song, were quite the same. But wasn't he?

In 2016, Dylan did win the Nobel Prize for literature. "It was a decision that seemed daring only beforehand," Horace Engdahl, then permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, observed at the Nobel ceremony, "and already seems obvious." Homer, Parry, and Lord would all be mentioned when it came time to publicly explain the academy's decision. "If people in the literary world groan," said Engdahl, "one must remind them that the gods don't write, they dance and they sing."

The world looked different when you saw it from a perch other than that of the lone writer sitting down with a manuscript to cudgel into shape, or that of a reader who, for pleasure and understanding, reflexively turned to books. In a traditionally

3

DOWN IN THE FLATS

The San Francisco earthquake of 1906 did not leave East Bay communities like Oakland untouched. The roof of the Empire Theatre collapsed, killing five members of its burlesque troupe. Brick walls crumbled, plate glass windows shattered, streets filled with rubble. Compared to San Francisco, however, the damage was contained and Oakland was able to shelter tens of thousands who fled there by ferryboat from the stricken city across the bay. Many never went back. Between the 1900 and 1910 censuses, Oakland's population swelled from 67,000 to 150,000. It was a new city, building, growing, annexing adjacent farmland.

On a cloudy day in 1912, from the corner of 4th Street and Broadway in downtown Oakland, someone snapped a picture looking south across the city: We see horse-drawn wagons, streetcar tracks, one- and two-story buildings, a pair of poor hotels, the Roma and the Italia, twenty-five cents and up for a room. In the distance, toward an inlet of San Francisco Bay, a forest of sailing ship masts rises over the horizon. In these earliest years of the twentieth century, Oakland was no longer the Wild West, but you didn't need much imagination to fire up visions of it. In 1910, Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders visited town; Bill Cody, in goatee and long flowing white hair under his cowboy hat, and American Indians in full regalia, lined up in front of the Oakland Tribune building for a publicity shot. The Transcontinental Railroad, the laying of whose golden spike famously cinched the Atlantic and Pacific coasts in 1869, had its western terminus in Oakland; the first trains pulled up at 7th and

Broadway, a mile from where the Parry family lived, at 478 22nd Street, when Milman was born in 1902.

His boyhood played out in no one family home; the Parrys rarely stayed more than two or three years anywhere, moving up a little, or trying to, with each new place. Mostly, they remained within a small, fitfully urban trapezoid of a district that fanned out north from downtown Oakland, between Broadway and Telegraph Avenue, an old stagecoach route that shot up the East Bay to Berkeley. The area, which seems to have gone by no particular designation, roughly corresponds to, or abuts, neighborhoods known today as Northgate, Waverly, Koreatown, Pill Hill (for its several hospitals), and Automobile Row (for the car dealerships that sprang up after 1912 along Broadway). It was a neighborhood of modest frame houses, small shops, and storefront factories, all an easy walk from the drugstore where Milman's father worked during much of Milman's childhood.

The Parry place—wherever exactly it was at any one time—stood far from the brown hills of east Oakland on which would one day perch fine homes, on steep slopes, with striking views of San Francisco Bay. They lived in the broad Oakland flatlands, or flats, where the vernacular architecture, as in much of the East Bay, was the wood-frame house. It was street after street of them, sometimes tucked cozily together, sometimes apart, rarely more than two stories high, occasionally showing off a bit of Victorian gingerbread or southwestern stucco. No big brownstones here, no mansions. By 1910, when Milman was eight, the family moved to 486 24th Street, around the corner from the drugstore, a street of laundries, flats, and squat single-family houses. Three doors down was a "dress shields and suspenders" factory, housed in a frame building little larger than their house. A stable stood across the street. A small sausage factory occupied a site over on Telegraph. Once you got much past 26th Street the neighborhood thinned out; looking north up the gradual slope of Broadway, you'd see as many windmills and water tanks as houses.

Milman's father, Isaac Milman Parry, was born in 1865. Isaac's own parents came from the Midwest, Ohio and Illinois, but were

said to go back to the Parrys who'd helped found New Hope, Pennsylvania, where a Parry Mansion dating to 1784 still stands. The Milman name that showed up in every recent generation was owed, Milman Parry's wife would report, to one of the Parry men who "ran away with a Miss Milman." Isaac's wife, born Mary Alice Emerson, was two years older than he. Both were California natives; their own parents, the pioneer generation, had come west across the continent in the mid-1800s. Of the winter rains and floods of his youth, Isaac would tell how "no one expected aid, they rebuilt by helping each other, the pioneers were friendly to each other, they lived simple lives, their houses were plain and easily repaired or rebuilt, there was no gas, no electricity, they had oil lamps, candles, fireplaces, wooden stoves. No rush."

Milman Parry, age fifteen.

When Isaac and Alice married in 1894, she brought to the new household an eight-year-old son, George, who took his stepfather's surname. Isaac and Alice had four children of their own. Girls Addison and Allison, fraternal twins, were born in 1896. A third

daughter, Lucile, followed in 1898. Their fourth child, Milman Paul Parry, the Homeric scholar, was born on June 23, 1902.

Milman was a bright-eyed boy with dark hair and regular features, a little shy of average height. He liked getting out, moving his body. He was a Boy Scout; in a photo taken of him in uniform at age eleven or twelve, he could have been a poster child for the Scouts he looks so fine, happy, and wholesome. Through the local YMCA, he camped, hiked, and swam. In June 1916 he joined 120 other boys for one of the Oakland Y's annual weeklong outings to the Santa Cruz Mountains, with nonstop sports, swimming, and boating, and visits to the picturesque Pigeon Point Lighthouse. Back in the neighborhood, he was stitched in enough that when a friend, son of an Oakland police inspector, held his annual birthday bash at Piedmont Park, or else at his house down 24th Street from the Parrys, Milman was regularly invited, sometimes going with one of his older sisters.

He was a smart boy, a good student. At Grant School, he was among those fifth and sixth graders accepted for the new Monday morning French program. His final year there, he was one of 248 boys—boys only—culled from schools around the city to collect Rotary Club achievement awards. He played chess; a photo taken around this time shows him near the end of a game, only a few pieces left standing. He and his opponent wear short-sleeved white shirts, ties, high-top shoes, and heavy woolen trousers, all alike enough to be a school uniform. The other boy, about his age, smirks. Maybe he has Milman in check; he seems delighted with himself. Milman does not. He remains lost in the game, engrossed.

4

THE OLD DEAR

In 1950, age eighty-five, Milman's father replied to a grandson's complaint that he had failed to answer his letter. This was true, he allowed, writing back in clear cursive script. But "I have no right to do this," by which he seems to mean setting down his thoughts at all. "I have an inferior complex about my ability to write an interesting letter....I was taken out of school at eleven years of age and put to work to help raise the family income, because of such few years of schooling, I am lacking the ability of expressing myself as well as I desire."

But writing was probably Isaac's only conspicuous academic deficit. "Our father was the 'student' " of the family, daughter Addison, Milman's sister, would write:

> There never was a time, until his death at 92, when he was not studying something. It might be navigation, it might be yoga. In his early twenties, during a few months on naval duty in Japan, he learned to speak that language well. As children, Japanese fairy tales were our delight and sea shanties our lullabies.

During World War II, by then close to eighty, an age when learning a language is notoriously difficult, he went back to Japanese, determined to refurbish his skills for the sake of the war effort. He was forever reading and learning. "He was a very scholastic man," says one grandson, Milman Youngjohn, son of Milman Parry's sister Lucile. "He had no formal education, but he was well educated."

and measures and back again; measure sugar and albumen in the urine; and so on. This was a time before Big Pharma, when your corner druggist prepared in the back of the store much of what he sold out front.

License in hand, Isaac moved the family to Sonora County, to a mountainous back country 125 miles east of Oakland, near the boundary of what had recently become Yosemite National Park. It was a gold rush country of log houses, land swindles, and rough justice. Here, daughter Addison would tell the story, he tried to set up shop in a mining camp; the evidence suggests a place known as Summersville, today a ghost town. But "life there was too hard for our frail mother," recorded Addison, who was around six at the time of the move, precipitating their return to the East Bay—first to Alameda and then to neighboring Oakland.

This was before the coming of the big drug chains, but one East Bay outfit, Bowman Drug, became known for training young pharmacists, and for a time Isaac worked in one of their stores. At various stages of his career, Isaac was clerk, owner, and manager, though not necessarily in that order, and never with complete success. Milman Parry's wife, Marian, would all but dismiss her father-in-law for having "a drugstore of his own which he evidently wasn't successful with, so finally he just was a pharmacist in somebody else's drugstore."

On February 2, 1909, a masked man named James B. Clifton, released from San Quentin penitentiary the Thursday before, walked in off Telegraph Avenue into the von Kieferdorf drugstore at the corner of 24th Street in Oakland, up the length of the store past the display cases to the counter at the back, pointed a gun at the clerk, and demanded money. "He was compelled to take flight," the *Oakland Tribune* reported the next day, "through the courageous actions of I. M. Parry, the clerk, who hurled the first object he came in contact with" at him, a heavy book. "This put the desperado to flight. He ran from the place and shot twice at Parry, but missed. Parry ran after him." Clifton ran out into the street, grappled with a detective who happened to live next door, was

arrested, brought up on charges of attempted murder, and sentenced to life in prison.

Most of Isaac's working life was more prosaic. His was an age when many treated themselves with patent medicines like Fletcher's Castoria or Pinkham's Vegetable Compound or, as one account has it, other "gargles, inhalations, enemas, poultices, tonics, elixirs, pills, lotions, syrups, and ointments." In 1911, when Milman was nine, I. M. Parry placed prominent ads in the *Oakland Tribune* for his own hair concoction.

YOUR HAIR CAN BE LONG, LUXURIANT AND GLORIOUS

Let us help you to attain a luxuriant healthy beautiful head of hair. Take our advice, try a bottle of

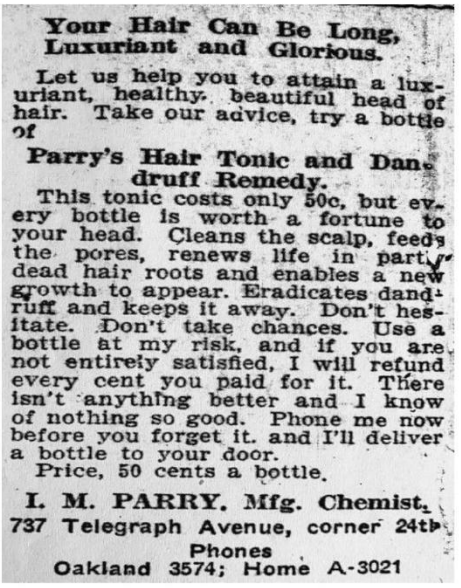
PARRY'S HAIR TONIC AND DANDRUFF REMEDY.

This tonic costs only 50¢, but every bottle is worth a fortune to your head. Cleans the scalp, feeds the pores, renews life in partly dead hair roots....Phone me now before you forget it, and I'll deliver a bottle to your door.

A few years later, Isaac, by now almost fifty and a little better established, belonged to the local association of druggists. When in 1913 the group met to discuss its recent policy of limiting Sunday hours, Isaac was among those to speak out. "There is absolutely no use to keep the stores open all day Sunday," said he. "Pharmacists are human beings just like other persons and therefore are entitled to at least a few hours of rest on Sundays." No need to extract a few more dollars from the long week.

For Isaac Parry, no dark bass notes drift down to us of laziness or dissipation, but neither do high notes of burning personal ambition. At the store, manning the counter and compounding prescriptions, he was competent enough. But his was a familiar middle-class story that never reached its third act, Horatio Alger–style, where industry and pluck transcend modest roots. He didn't

become rich. He wasn't highly accomplished in ways Milman's future colleagues might have valued.



Your Hair Can Be Long, Luxuriant and Glorious.

Let us help you to attain a luxuriant, healthy, beautiful head of hair. Take our advice, try a bottle of

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Price, 50 cents a bottle.

I. M. PARRY, Mfg. Chemist,
737 Telegraph Avenue, corner 24th
Phones
Oakland 3574; Home A-3021

In 1911, a neighborhood druggist typically prepared in the back of his store much of what he sold out front. Here, Isaac Parry's own hair tonic.

On the other hand, he carved out a life for himself and his family, retaining the love and respect of his children. At home, certainly, he seems to have been far more approachable than the stereotypically stony nineteenth-century father figure; in a letter to his sister Addison in 1935, Milman would write of his father: "His candor is such that he cannot say the smallest thing without showing his whole state of being." When he was young, Milman took to calling him "the Old Dear," and the name stuck.

In his eighties Isaac sent his grandson Milman Youngjohn a cheerful Christmas card otherwise all sleighs and carolers:

Hello Grandson
How is German Dilligence?
Are you getting your name Up?
Are you a good Husband?

Do you live within your income?
Are you <u>always</u> a
<u>Gentleman</u>?
This last question needs
a yes to satisfy
The old Dear
Lots of love to you & Beep.

This was not some old codger's sanctimonious missive, stresses Mr. Youngjohn, but grandfatherly playfulness, complete with a gentle dig at Youngjohn's own father, known for his Teutonic efficiency. *Here* was his grandfather as he remembered him, never entirely serious. One time Isaac was asked, out of the blue, whether he was Jewish, this despite the family's established Welsh Quaker roots. His reply was vintage Isaac: "Well, the Phoenicians are known to have mined tin in Wales around the time of Christ." Thus, a reply that was not quite a reply, swaddled in a tidbit of sly semitruth.

It's harder to say how Milman's mother, Alice, figured in his life, in part because she died when he was just sixteen. They were close, perhaps more so even than Milman and his father, Marian would guess later. A studio portrait shows Alice in her midforties, wearing a lacy, high-collared dress, Milman about seven, his arm draped casually around her shoulder. He wears a little jacket and looks for all the world like Beaver from the 1950s TV show. They make for an appealing mother-son twosome, if we can count on a posed Victorian portrait to reveal anything at all. But this same photo, when she saw it later, exerted a hold on Marian, too. She wasn't used to seeing her husband looking so easy and relaxed, yet there he was, "snuggled up to her. He was very affectionate and loving as a small child....I don't know when or how the...iron entered into his soul."

Marian came to view his mother—through Milman himself, most likely, since she never met her—as a strong, disciplined figure. "She had to be, living the kind of life she did," presumably a reference to Isaac's looser ways. "Our mother was artistic in a

rather Jane Austen sense," reported Addison. "She painted well and played the piano." A scrawled caption on the mother-son photo reads: "She supported the family giving piano lessons."

Mother—Alice Emerson Parry—
and son.

Marian would picture the Parrys—their roots back east, with a silly family coat of arms no less, and a tendency to distance themselves from their neighbors—as infected by snobbism: "They felt they were superior," if without obvious reason to think so. Once, years later, their son Adam was having dinner with his aunt Lucile, who'd married the owner of a forty-three-acre orange grove in El Cajon, outside San Diego. "Oh," she gushed at one point, "I wish I had peasant blood." Adam, who could be snarky, fairly choked on his wine: "Well, Lucile, what do you think you have?"

After Milman's death, one of his former students at Harvard, Harry Levin, painted a warmly tinted "Portrait of a Homeric Scholar" that spoke of Milman's presumably "overburdened adolescence"; it left him, wrote Levin, with "the emotional grasp of one who has supported himself since the age of thirteen." This is

The impulse extended even to his father. In Milman's letters, it could seem that Isaac, thirty-seven years his senior, was just one of the clan, included among recipients of his lighthearted epistolary treatments. From Greece, in 1925, Milman comments on his father's letter, which had been "written on a thin paper of a sort more typically used for other purposes (those purposes which, according to you, are necessary but never talked about)." After telling of his travels in Greece, including references to this "unclean race and its doubtful food," he concludes by simply asserting, "The Parthenon is good looking."

"So to end this letter, the only one I've written like it, for travel letters are of doubtful value. But for your sake, Old Dear, anything....Your noblest and most filial, Milman."

5

ARMILIUS THE SAGE

Elementary school for Milman was Grant School, at 29th Street, easy walking distance from the house. Then, beginning in 1916 he was off to Oakland Tech, the new crown jewel of the city's public school system, a mile and a half up Broadway. Tech's earlier incarnation was as a school for the mechanical trades. The yearbook still included gray, leaden ads for machine tool suppliers. Behind the main building, with its façade of white classical columns, stood four low, shed-like shops for woodworking, metalwork, and other mechanical arts.

Tech was a big, roiling place, a modern high school, said to be third largest in the country, its arrival on upper Broadway in 1915 enough of an event to garner a long article in the pages of *The Architect*. For its 2,000 day students, class ranged from 7:30 to 3:30; then came the next wave, the school's 3,000 afternoon and evening students. Milman was there for three and a half years, his time darkened by historical events brought closer to home than students, parents, or teachers might have wished.

The Great War broke out in August 1914, America's entry coming in April 1916, during Milman's first semester. Spy fever closed down the radio club, founded a few years earlier, apparently for fear of wayward or illicit signals. Trenches were dug on the ball fields behind the school to introduce the boys to the Western Front. Required military education included drills and sham bayonet attacks. Mechanical drawing students made blueprints for the Oakland shipyards. A cartoon in Milman's class yearbook showed the devil pitchforking the hated Hun, in his spiked helmet, sprawled in the mud, defeated.